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DEPT FOR EUR/WE LARREA, DRL/IRF MATES AND KELLY

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SUBJECT: MOROCCO INCREASING ENGAGEMENT WITH VATICAN

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) Ali Achour, Morocco's new ambassador to the Holy See, told Ambassador Rooney March 27 that his country was planning to intensify its work with the Holy See on interreligious dialogue and understanding. He recalled the visit of Pope John Paul II to Morocco in 1985, after which the kingdom moved to open an embassy to the Vatican. He said his government had recognized at that time the pivotal role the Holy See could play in dialogue. Achour said Morocco was in a good position to be a leader on the issue among the several Arab nations represented at the Vatican, due to its faithfulness to tradition, combined with steps it had taken towards modernity in democracy and women's rights. He emphasized Morocco's efforts in the war on terror, and noted that demonstrations in Morocco against the Danish cartoons were peaceful. Achour added that the king's status as both a religious and secular leader provided further opportunities for effective interaction with the Holy See.

¶2. (C) Achour's February 18 credentials ceremony with Pope Benedict XVI attracted substantial media attention since the pope took the opportunity to weigh in on the anti-cartoon violence. Achour told the Ambassador that Cardinal Secretary of State Angelo Sodano spent a good half hour with him following the ceremony, using the bulk of the time to discuss Saudi Arabia. Achour understood the Vatican's attention to Saudi Arabia, but also pointed out that there were some limits to Morocco's opportunity to influence that country. "In some ways, it's a different world," he observed.

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador Achour (b. 1949 in Oujda) has been in the diplomatic service since 1971, serving in Denmark, Switzerland, Spain, Venezuela, Norway, and Brazil. He was chief of mission in the latter three posts. He was enthusiastic about the Ambassador's suggestion that we work with him on our continuing efforts to support interreligious dialogue at the Vatican and with related organizations.

ROONEY